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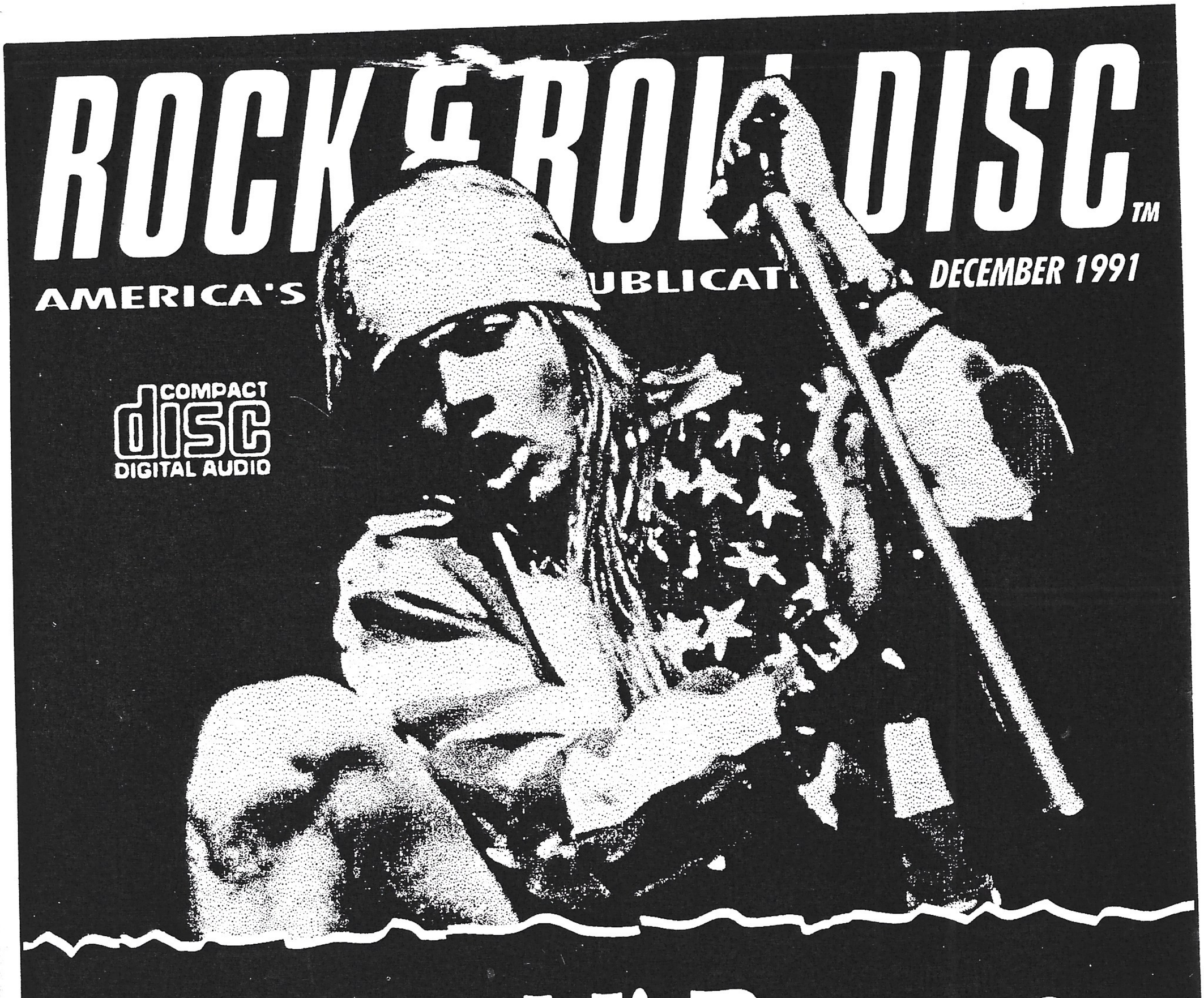
AMERICA'S PUBLICATION

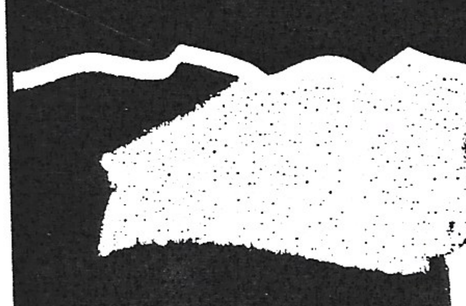
DECEMBER 1991



GUNS N' ROSES

An American Band, By God

Talking With Danny Sugerman About His New Guns N' Roses Book



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Feature Interview

Tales Of Brave Dionysus

And Other Subjects From Danny Sugerman, Doors Scholar and Guns N' Roses Theorist

by Danny McCue

Danny Sugerman has been, since the tender age of 13, variously employed to open mail for the Doors, a magazine journalist whose first assignment (for *Creem* magazine) was covering Jim Morrison's trial for obscenity in Miami, manager of the surviving Doors, Iggy Pop, and the L.A. post-punk band X, and the co-author with Jerry Hopkins of the best-selling *No One Here Gets Out Alive*. Back in 1989 he penned a non-ficiton novel, *Wonderland Avenue*, that he has sometimes described as an autobioography, sometimes not.

In his book *Appetite for Destruction -- the Days of Guns N' Roses*, published last summer by St. Martin's Press, rock culture scribe Danny Sugerman deals with many of the same themes so prevalent in his past work as an author. Weaved throughout the text are tales of wretched excess and, not incidentally, stories of a band in the process of becoming extraordinary. Call Guns N' Roses what you will -- they've been called everything from "intoxicating" to "reactionary misogynists" -- they are impossible to ignore. In Sugerman's eyes they are, "the death rattle of 2,000 years of Judeo-Christian culture."

--Danny McCue

Rock & Roll Disc: The word "unauthorized" is a pretty juicy item to have on a biography these days. What's the story of it being on *Appetite For Destruction*?

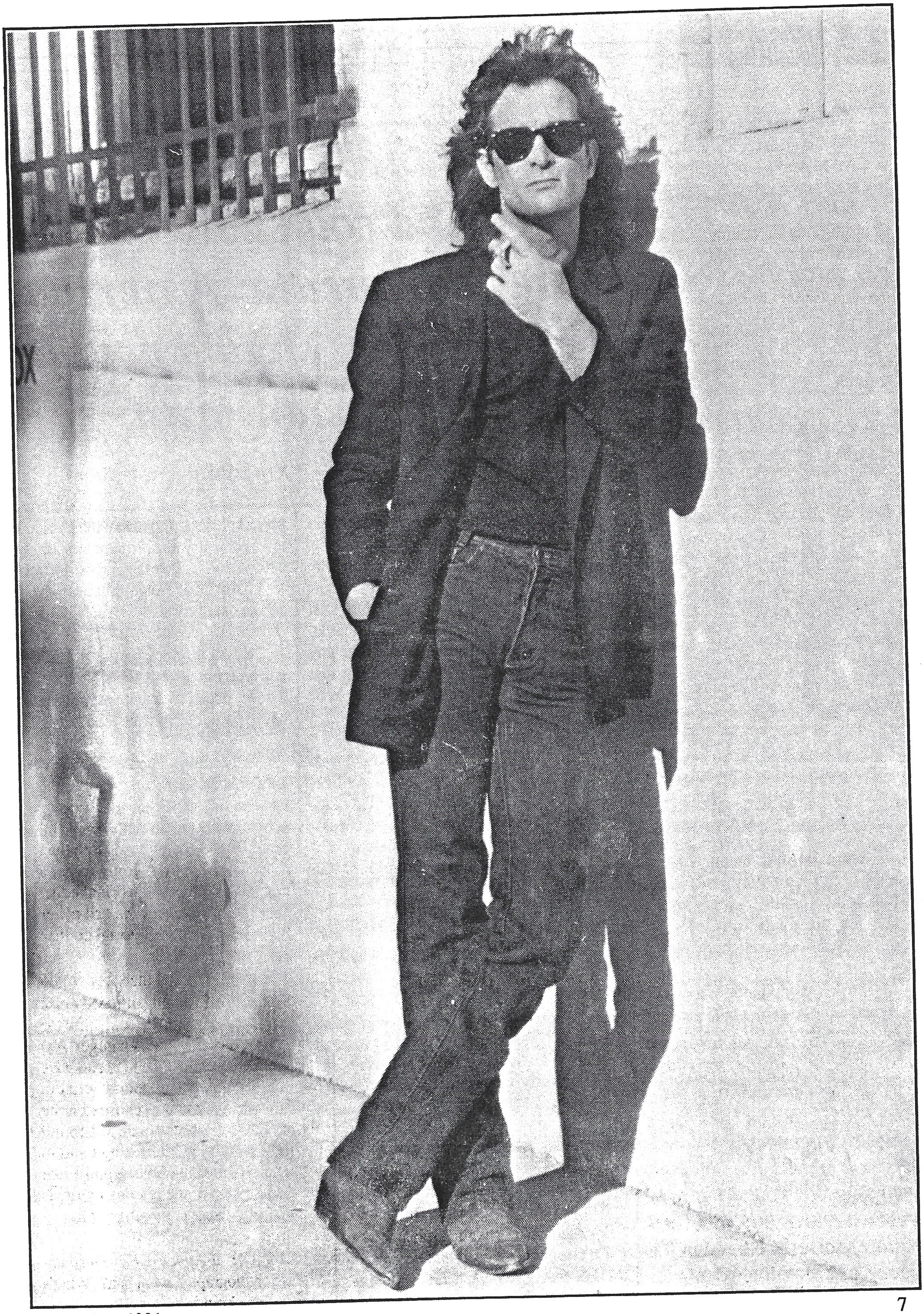
Danny Sugerman: I wouldn't have chosen to put the words "unauthorized" or "biography" on it, so I have to point the finger back at the publisher on that one. It's not a standard biography, although it does contain biographical material and can be read that way. Actually, it's probably wise for the publisher to put the word "unauthorized" on the cover, because Guns N' Roses have somebody writing their biography and this is not that. Guns N' Roses have a reputation of controlling what is written about them, and they *did not* control this. In fact, it was written despite their initial attempts to prevent it.

R&RD: Why'd they do that?

Sugerman: Because they didn't want anyone other than themselves making any money off them, and they also didn't want a writer writing about them in an idiom they couldn't contain and control. The classic example of how Guns N' Roses operate is when Axl was interviewed by a friend of his for *Rolling Stone*. Guns N' Roses had originally wanted final editorial approval on the interview and *Rolling Stone* wouldn't give it to them. Finally they settled by saying, "Look, chose a writer you want, but don't ask us for anything more than that, because you're not going to get a *Rolling Stone* cover and get final edit." And even then *Rolling Stone* had never given away that much editorial control before.

I'm not saying that the story would have been different had somebody else written it, or been juicier, I just think the writer asked Axl about whatever Axl wanted to talk about at the time and gave him the freedom to respond without really challenging him. I chose to write about Guns N' Roses because I found them the next most interesting band to write about, after the Doors, and I like them a lot. One of the reasons I write is to share my discovery with people.

R&RD: If *Appetite For Destruction* isn't a biography, what is it? What's innovative about it?



Sugerman: It takes rock and roll seriously as an art form, in the tradition of Greil Marcus's *Lipstick Traces*, which is a think piece using the Sex Pistols as a vehicle. It also looks at rock and roll as a religious subculture. To me it's a very natural progression from *No One Here Gets Out Alive* to *Wonderland Avenue* to *Appetite For Destruction*. It was a way for me to explore, investigate, and develop my personal thesis about the rest of the world through the medium of rock and roll.

R&RD: Let's backtrack a little. How was *Wonderland Avenue*, an autobiographical novel, a direct progression from the Jim Morrison book, and how did it in turn lead to this one?

Sugerman: For one thing, I wrote at least half of *Wonderland Avenue* totally sober and I rewrote *No One Here Gets Out Alive* totally fucked up. I think that's what gave *No One*... some of the tension it had, because I tried to make every page count. I literally wasn't sure if I'd wake up the next morning. What all three have in common is that they were all a labor of love. I still haven't changed in that department. I can still only do something that I genuinely care about.

R&RD: And it seems to me, whenever I read something you've written, that you communicate that very well. But I'm often left wondering, "Gee, doesn't he listen to anybody else?"

Sugerman: On the second page of *Wonderland Avenue* I talk about listening to Bob Dylan's *Blood On the Tracks*, and that wasn't just a joke -- that I was shooting drugs and *Blood On the Tracks* and ha-ha. I was really into *Blood On the Tracks*. I'm a big Dylan fan, a big Rolling Stones fan, I listen to the Jesus and Mary Chain and R.E.M. I co-managed X for two years, when Ray Manzarek was producing them.

R&RD: How was working with X?

Sugerman: It was frustrating to tell you the truth. I thought Exene Cervenka -- and I don't use the words often -- was a real first-class racist cunt. John Doe was great and Billy Zoom was just sort of this grinning giant and Don (D.J. Bonebrake) was real communicable. Exene, I think, really meant that line about hating every "nigger and Jew that gave her a lot of shit." As a matter of fact, I think I inspired it.

"My theory is that great rock and roll should alienate corporate America. Tipper Gore should not like a great rock and roll band."

R&RD: Before collaborating with you on *No One Here Gets Out Alive*, Jerry Hopkins wrote a best-selling biography of Elvis Presley that many considered little more than myth-making. Do you think that he mythologized the Doors in your book?

Sugerman: No, I found he made Jim Morrison boring, which is why I felt I had to rewrite it.

R&RD: It's been several years since I read that book, which I read all in one night, incidentally, and one of the things that stands out in my mind are the long conversations you had with Jim Morrison. What was it about each of you that made them possible?

Sugerman: I think Jim had a desire to be taken seriously, and I just had the ears to hear. I think Jim would've made a great college professor if he had lived. He would've been a real mystical guy. He just wanted to do it all in a short period of time. That was the choice he made and it was fortunate for us, because like I said at the end of the book, we got his life. He got nothing, except he got dead.

R&RD: Back to the present; do you worry at all that Guns N' Roses' audience doesn't have a reputation for being particularly well-read?

Sugerman: People said that about the Doors audience too. And, you know, I know full well that the people who bought *No One*... initially weren't interested in Morrison's poetry, they were more interested in his sex image. I think this book will appeal to Guns N' Roses' fans. I think it will also appeal to people interested in rock and roll.

R&RD: What makes Guns N' Roses' story more than just another live fast, leave a beautiful corpse story?

Sugerman: Listen, when I started this book two and a half years ago I thought "What if they turn out to be another Knack? What if 'Welcome To the Jungle' is this year's 'My Sharona'? What if I'm staking my literary reputation on a band that did no more than one album?" That looked like a real possibility for a while -- that one of them would die or two of them would die, and that they'd become just another crashing footnote with a little commercial succes

to back them up. But the bet I made was that Guns N' Roses, specifically Axl, is a real talent and really has something to say. I think he's genuinely one of those artists who is too sensitive to live life without a buffer, without some kind of defense mechanism between himself and the rest of the world, whether it's drugs, or defensive acting out behavior, or stardom or what have you. Axl, in my view, falls into the tradition of the wounded, gifted, sensitive artist who feels life too intensely to handle it, yet his sensitivity enables him to convey meaning through symbols and images that enriches the rest of us.

R&RD: I think there are a lot of people who would withhold such a resounding endorsement.

Sugerman: My bet was that Axl, whether he never did another album, deserved acknowledgement, and in answer to what you're saying, I think he'll go on to deserve that vote of confidence.

R&RD: On the basis of your own life experience, were there times during the writing of the book that you felt compelled to say, "No guys, don't do that"?

Sugerman: Sure. I write in the book that I didn't know whether to congratulate them for returning rock and roll to its rightful place of being music by misfits, for misfits, or to take them over my knee and spank them for such feeble attempts at attraction. I felt both. My theory is that great rock and roll should alienate corporate America. Tipper Gore should not like a great rock and roll band. Parents should worry about a great rock and roll band coming to their town and raping their sons and daughters. Rock and roll is not the sound of compromise and capitulation.

On the other hand, God, it's 1991 and we know better. Jim Morrison, Jimi Hendrix, and Janis Joplin died for Axl Rose's sins, you might say. Axl should know better, but it's a testament to the authenticity of his dilemma that he doesn't. And it's a testimony to the dilemma of many teenagers in America that the music of Guns N' Roses has struck such a responsive chord.

R&RD: When talking about the band you constantly refer to Axl Rose. Do the other guys in the band get their due in this book?

Sugerman: No, they probably don't. Working with Axl is like working with someone like Morrison. It's a mixed blessing. On the one hand you have the honor of working with so creative and ecstatic an individual, but you also have the burden of working with an unpredictable and potentially emotionally volatile individual who steals the spotlight. You make a shit-load of money, but you also don't get the recognition you deserve. Slash I see as a kind of combination of Manzarek and Krieger. I mean, he almost writes better Axl Rose songs than Axl Rose does. It's the same as Robbie Krieger creating "Light My Fire" and "Love MeTwo Times," which were perfect Morrison songs. The vision behind Guns N' Roses isn't solely Axl's, but as the lead singer of the band, it's his job to hold the spotlight and coalesce the vision, just as Bono does in U2 and Mick Jagger does in the Rolling Stones.

R&RD: When writing a book about rock and roll, isn't there a danger of losing the music and dwelling on the image?

Sugerman: "Writing about music is like dancing about furniture," Lester Bangs once said. That's a great line. Sure, yeah, of course. I like to think I'm a rock and roll writer. People ask, "Don't you want to write about something else?" No, why? I guess it's like talking to a nun. Doesn't she ever feel she wants a real man instead of an imaginary Jesus? They'd say, "Well, he fulfills all of my needs. Why would I need a real man?" I don't want to write about anything else. I like to think I convey the energy of rock and roll in my writing in the same way that someone reviewing classical music expresses the complexity of that experience. Yes, it is limiting, but I see that as more of a challenge than a liability.#

The Collins Kids

--continued from page 27

don't cut it on anthologies, unless you're collecting Shirley Temple box sets.

The good folks at Bear Family have had the rockabilly sides compiled on a two-volume vinyl set (*Rockin' Rollin' Collins Kids*) for several years now, with a stray volume of the Larry & Maphis duets (all still in print), but this collects it all together on two CDs in the typically snazzy Bear Family album-size box set format, with the space for the 3rd CD fitted instead with a nifty picture-card of The Kids and a *par excellence* booklet crammed full of geat black and white photos and grade-A liners from Colin Escott, spot on as always.

The Kids' material on this box in a great many ways mirrors their stage show presentation over the years. Cutesie-pie sister and pesky little brother specialty material like "Hush Money" and "Make Him Behave" hold up real fine next to early rockers like "Beetle Bug Bop" and "The Rockaway Rock," which sound great next to weepers and teen-dream fodder like "Missouri Waltz" and "My First Love." By the time they hit 4th gear on the stormers like "Hoy Hoy" and "Mercy" (not to mention "I'm In My Teens," "Sweet Talk," and "Party," perhaps their biggest seller) with Lorrie a-growlin' and Larry taking over the lead chores from Joe Maphis (who's all over these sides, something not to be missed), you realize you're in the presence of real hillbilly child prodigy greatness here.

The Collins Kids would have made it into adulthood, no sweat, if they hadna gone their separate ways, so in the long run, as it usually is with most Bear Family boxes, it's nice to have it all in one place to program as you please or take it all in at once if you've got 2 1/2 hours to kill. Good stuff here, yes sir.

--Cub Koda